

A crisis of measurability? Critiquing post-operaismo on labour, value and the basic income

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Abstract

This article critiques post-operaist conceptualisations of immaterial labour from the perspective of Marxian value-form theory. Critiquing the idea of the 'crisis of measurability' created by immaterial labour and the contention that this makes redundant the law of value, it contests the novelty, immediate abstractness and immeasurable productivity post-operaists attribute to contemporary labour using the New Reading of Marx. The first part explores this theoretical conflict, asserting that post-operaismo refutes Marx's value theory only insofar as it holds a productivist understanding of value to begin with. The second reflects upon the political implications through a consideration of the post-operaist advocacy of a universal basic income. Appeals to reward, recompense and redistribution rest upon the veracity of the claims made in the post-operaist treatment of labour, value and their immateriality and immeasurability. A value-form analysis exposes flaws in the assumptions about value and labour that support their case for a universal basic income.

Keywords

New Reading of Marx, post-operaismo, Negri, immaterial labour, abstract labour, value, measure, basic income

Introduction

This year marks the 15th anniversary of the paperback publication of Hardt and Negri's (2001) *Empire*. Its release secured peak visibility for the rich tradition of Italian *post-operaismo* (Wright 2002), sparking a continuing debate about class, power, strategy and the changing

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face of labour at the commencement of the 21st century (Balakrishnan 2003; Passavant & Dean 2003). Bringing to light Italian radical left discussions about ‘immaterial labour’ (Virno & Hardt 1996), it challenged conventional Marxist understandings of work in capitalist society. Importantly, it disputed the relevance of Marx’s labour theory of value. However, as Kicillof and Starosta (2007: 31, n. 4) suggest, post-operaismo’s autonomist lineage rarely addresses contemporary debates in Marxian value theory (for an instructive exchange, see Bonefeld 2010, 2011; Carchedi 2011; Kicillof & Starosta 2007, 2011). Although Hardt and Negri’s ‘rejection of the contemporary relevance of the law of value’ implies dialogue, post-operaismo in the wake of *Empire* seldom engages with cutting-edge re-readings of Marx’s value theory. This article seeks to bridge this divide.

Empire was ‘academia’s version of a blockbuster’, described as a once-in-a-decade ‘intellectual event’ (Passavant & Dean 2003: 2). Its analysis of world power chimed with the tumult of globalisation. After the first run sold out, Harvard University Press hastily unleashed a mass-market paperback edition (Vuillamy 2001). With *Multitude* (Hardt & Negri 2004) and *Commonwealth* (Hardt & Negri 2009), *Empire* came to constitute part of a loose trilogy, its arguments gaining new resonances as the decade progressed. The theorisation of ‘multitude’ as a political actor became a go-to idea for a generation of activists ‘reared on their Hardt and Negri’ (Mason 2011).

Hardt and Negri’s popularisation of post-operaist theories of immaterial labour, however, had a subtler impact, largely confined to academia and the art world (Graeber 2008). Ideas akin to ‘immaterial labour’ are, after all, common currency in public discourse. The mainstream is well abreast of the same empirical shifts as described by Hardt and Negri: the move towards a service economy, the development of the creative industries, the prominence of cognition and emotional connection in contemporary workplaces, the fragmentation and dispersal of work time, the blurred line between work and leisure, the rise of information technology, the immense power of communicative networks and the proliferation of non-standard forms of employment and contractual arrangements. The trends to which theorists of immaterial labour react in delineating the concept are stark enough to have been covered extensively elsewhere. As such, the significance of the theory is mainly limited to the development of academic research agendas and to debates about the changing face of labour. The concept’s relevance to debates in Marxian value theory receives less attention. I seek to rectify this by foregrounding this aspect.

The immaterial labour thesis was originally formulated by Maurizio Lazzarato (1996). It depicts a transformation of work in late capitalist economies. For Hardt and Negri, these changes are not so much numerically significant as cultural and social. The transition to immaterial, postindustrial labour is not a *quantitative* shift, but a change in the hegemony of certain kinds of activity within the world of work (Hardt & Negri 2004: 107–109). According to Hardt and Negri (2001), ‘industrial production is no longer expanding its dominance’, economically and socially (pp. 285–286). Take, for instance, the move from secondary to tertiary occupations characterised by ‘the central role played by knowledge, information, affect and communication’. For Hardt and Negri, this shift does not mean that industrial production has ceased or will cease. Older forms of labour, such as manufacturing, become infused with an informational aspect, akin to how industrial production came to infuse agriculture in the past (Hardt & Negri 2001).

The first aspect of the transformation in the quality and the nature of labour that Hardt and Negri (2001) cite is the change from a Fordist to a post-Fordist model (p. 289). Under this new paradigm, labour is flexible, mobile and precarious (Hardt & Negri 2004: 112). In the rapid feedback loop of the Toyotist model, communication and information play a pivotal role. The service sectors reveal an even 'richer model of productive communication'. This is immaterial labour, of which Hardt and Negri (2001) distinguish three types (p. 293). The first is the where industrial production has been informationalised, incorporating communication technologies. This turns manufacturing into more of a service, mixing durable goods with the immaterial. For instance, the most advanced automobile manufacturers incorporate the creative labour of designers and advertising professionals at an early stage (Pitts 2015a). The second is the immaterial labour of analytical and symbolic tasks, broken down into a division between manipulation and routine. This division could be applied to, on one hand, games designers and, on the other, games programmers. The third is the production and manipulation of affect, whether through virtual or actual human contact. Care workers are one example.

Thus, post-operaist theorists suggest that labour becomes synonymous with the creation and manipulation of ideas, symbols, selves, emotions and relationships. Work comes to inhabit the full range of human capacities and activities. As such, the boundary blurs between work time engaged in immaterial labour and spare time away from paid employment. The activities of work take on the characteristics of those of leisure and of everyday life and those of leisure and everyday life assume the characteristics of work. Immaterial labour thus transcends the formal confines of the working day to invest the whole of life with its value-producing processes. In response to this, theorists of immaterial labour posit a 'crisis of measurability' (Marazzi 2008: 43). The crisis arises from the impossibility of the quantification of work time and value. This afflicts any application of the labour theory of value (Vercellone 2010). As Andrea Fumagalli and Sandro Mezzadra (2010) assert, '[w]ith the advent of cognitive capitalism, the process of valorization loses all quantitative measuring units connected with material production' (pp. 238–239).

In this article, I argue that the immaterial labour thesis brings into dispute only a traditional, orthodox labour theory of value. The conditions it describes leaves intact the abstract law of value by which capitalism operates. Theorists of immaterial labour are correct to say that the *labour* theory of value is redundant. Indeed, it was ever thus. Capital has always struggled in its attempts to render human labour productive against a 'crisis' of measurability. But it is *abstract* labour that enters into and sustains the social relationship of value, more so than that expended in the realm of production. Thus, capital has always faced the immateriality of the process of abstraction as a potential crisis of measurability. In this way, the existence of immaterial labour poses no threat to critical reinterpretations of value theory such as the New Reading of Marx (NRM). Post-operaists see immaterial labour as stealing away the empirical and theoretical foundations of the law of value. But an approach to value oriented around the 'social validation' of abstract labour (Heinrich 2012: 50–51) places little importance on the possibility or impossibility of the quantification of working hours. This approach transcends the crisis of measurability posited in the post-operaist literature. It conceives of such a crisis as a permanent and in no way novel feature of valorisation.

Previous attacks on the conceptual apparatus of ‘immaterial labour’ adopt a much different critical standpoint, highlighting enduring materiality (Banks et al. 2013: Pt 2) or attempting the ‘rematerialisation’ of discourse around the topic (Doogan 2009: 6). My approach does neither, assuming a standpoint of *even greater immateriality*. In so doing, it contends that the concept of immaterial labour does not go far enough. The post-operaist theorisation of the relationship between labour, value and measure inhabits an orthodoxy that is too ‘materialist’ by far.

From their conceptualisations of value and labour, post-operaists derive the case for a universal basic income (UBI; Hardt & Negri 2001; Vercellone 2010). The approach I take in this article critiques the theoretical foundations for post-operaist appeals to this policy. These appeals witness the recurrence of notions of reward, recompense and redistribution, in turn resting upon the veracity of the claims made in the post-operaist treatment of labour, value and their immateriality and immeasurability. Particular ways of conceiving problems can lead to certain political ‘solutions’. I would suggest that the post-operaist recommendation of a basic income represents precisely such an extrapolation of politics from analysis. The wrong interpretation of value in capitalist society here results in a focus on the wrong kind of political action. It is not that the politics are a misguided distortion of the facts of the analysis. Rather, the fault is immanent within the analysis itself.

Theoretical context

Let us assume that value stems from measurable, concrete, performed chunks of labour-time. On the basis of such an assumption, ‘immaterial production’ calls into question the labour theory of value. But the trouble posed to the labour theory of value owes not to the new status of immaterial labour, but the inadequacies of just such a ‘labour’ theory of value. Theorists of immaterial labour tend to affirm this orthodox ‘labour’ theory of value only to refute it. They repeat its uncritical ascription of value production to human labour and the time in which it takes place. This disavowed repetition then allows them to criticise other implications of that orthodoxy. Vercellone, for instance, sees the crisis of measurability rendering the theory of value redundant. But he can only do this by retaining an orthodox understanding of the basic fact of that theory of value. This is that labour is the ‘substance and the source of the creation of value and surplus value’. In this account, value results from human labour, rather than as a residue of human labour in exchange (Vercellone 2010: 92). It is this positive claim about value that facilitates the negative claim vis-à-vis the obsolescence of Marx’s theory of it.

In a more upfront way, Negri accepts that his ‘critique actively embraces the Marxian point of view’ by foregrounding the concrete form of labour in the creation of value. The fact that he endows this concrete labour with an ‘immaterial’ aspect renders it no less concrete (Negri 2008: 67–68). Negri (2008) is emphatic that ‘*labour still remains the fundamental and sole element of value creation*’ (p. 183). The only difference with past renditions is the nature of the new labour. It renders the theory of value irrelevant. It is boundless and immaterial, its value ‘determined deep in the viscera of life’ (Hardt and Negri 2001: 365). In the ‘productive excess’ that results (Hardt and Negri 2001: 357), the law of value ‘reveals itself in its greatest expansion’ (Negri 2008: 183). This assertion

is interesting. It suggests that only one part of the law of value and the theory that describes it suffers in this expansion: the criterion of measurability, of the ability of capital to measure and abstract value from labour. What expands, Hardt and Negri imply, is the status of labour as the source and substance of all value. Their insistence upon the latter makes possible their insistence on the former. But it also invites a critique of the conceptual framework that they use to make this argument. Claiming that the law of value expands when applied to labour beyond measure grants misplaced importance to labour and too little to measure. The reason that the law of value can stay intact at all is because measure is still possible, despite the immaterial labour thesis.

Hardt and Negri, Vercellone and others remain wedded to an orthodox interpretation of the concept of the labour theory of value. At the same time, they seek to overcome it with 'new' facts. As Weeks (2011: 93) suggests, 'there is a fidelity to Marx in Negri's work that might be construed to be as orthodox as any other'. Interpreted differently, the Marxian theory of value is harder to refute. My interpretation stresses not the material measurement of specifically *concrete* labour-time but *abstract* labour. Such a 'value-form' perspective accommodates a much greater degree of immateriality. This enables me to perform the same manoeuvre as that I attribute to Hardt and Negri, only in reverse. I accept their understanding of the 'fact' of immaterial labour. But in the same movement, I overcome it with a new conceptualisation of the relationship between labour-time and value. I dispute the special, unique and novel status afforded to immaterial labour, delineating how a theory of the value-form broadens the ascription of immateriality to *all* capitalist valorised labour.

The theory of value with which I proceed draws upon work by Marxian theoreticians such as Werner Bonefeld (2010) and Michael Heinrich (2012). These thinkers broadly coalesce under the banner of the NRM. Inspired by the work of I. I. Rubin (1972), the NRM originated in the work of Helmut Reichelt (2005) and Hans-Georg Backhaus (1992, 2005). Working from a careful reinterpretation of Marx's written output, the NRM inflects its reading of Marx with Frankfurt School social theory. The critique of political economy is thus read as a critical theory of society rather than an economic theory per se (Bellofiore & Riva 2015; Bonefeld 2014). The NRM thus presents 'a Marxism stripped of dogmatic certainties and naturalistic conceptions of society (Bonefeld 2014: 41–42).

The NRM espouses a 'monetary theory of value' (Bellofiore 2009). Notwithstanding differences (Bonefeld 2014: Chapter 4; Pitts 2015b), thinkers associated with the NRM share an anti-substantialist approach to the theory of value that stresses the importance of abstraction and social validation. This has two aspects, according to Christian Lotz. The first is that 'the value form must be a socially valid form' (Marx, quoted in Lotz 2014: 38). By extension, the second is Arthur's contention that '[v]alue has a purely social reality' (Arthur, quoted in Lotz 2014: 38). These are key shared point of agreement among thinkers associated with the NRM (Lotz 2014: 69, n. 21).

The theory of value I derive from the NRM proceeds as follows. To exchange as commodities, products of labour (whether goods or services) must have some kind of value on the basis of which they can relate to one another. This provides a metric for decisions about what quantity things can exchange in and for. But the labours specific to each good or service are heterogeneous and incomparable. Thus, the *concrete* specificity of

individual labours must be *abstracted from*. This abstraction smoothes out the differences. It generates pure, undifferentiated homogeneous ‘amounts’ of labour. This then provides the grounds for like-for-like comparison. This undifferentiated labour is *abstract* labour. It is because of this that a good or service exchanges with other goods and services by means of money, attaining the status of a commodity.

Abstract labour does not take place itself, as come about by means of a process of abstraction. Concrete, private, performed labour *does* take place. It becomes social and abstract only after its expenditure. First, a product of labour is confirmed as a commodity possessing value and exchangeability. Only then is the concrete labour-time that went into its production *validated* as a part of the total abstract labour-time of society. It passes as *productive* labour that has helped bestow value upon a good or service. The good or service can then stand as a commodity in a relationship of equivalence and commensurability with the other commodities of the market. This unfolds by means of money. Marx (1863 [1861]) writes that ‘[a] singer who sells her singing on her own is an unproductive worker, but the same singer when hired by an entrepreneur to sing in order to make money is a productive worker because she produces capital’. Thus, the singer sings with or without the capitalist turning her songs to profit. Whatever the exact nature of the end result of her labours, the essential task remains the same. But it is only when the capitalist exchanges her songs or performances for money that her labour becomes productive. Thus, we may say that productivity is ultimately determined in exchange.

Critique of three claims

I will use this wider theoretical context as a springboard for the critique of three claims: the novelty of immaterial labour, the concrete existence of immaterial labour as immediately abstract and the status of immaterial labour as productive of immeasurable value. The critique of these claims challenges the terms of the mooted ‘crisis of measurability’. These claims also support the recommendation of a UBI in Hardt and Negri, Vercellone and elsewhere. They see this as a means of remunerating the new immeasurable wealth of cooperative immaterial production. This is a political project that stems from the post-operaist treatment of labour and value. Having critiqued the claims, I will highlight deficiencies in the justifications used to support a basic income.

The novelty of immaterial labour

Post-operaists emphasise the novelty of immaterial labour and how it exceeds the law of value. New communicative, cognitive and affective forms of immaterial production generate an immeasurable plenitude of value that capitalist frameworks cannot capture. In this rendition, immaterial labour is something completely new to capitalism. The practices and results of work appear as having been primarily material in the past. But today, such accounts suggest, a new immaterial aspect suffuses every step from labour to exchange.

Yet, the thesis of immaterial labour, rather than surpassing the theory of value, does not go far enough. It is hamstrung by its insistence upon the novelty of that which it describes. This is because labour, value and exchange – and the interrelationship between them – have always had an immaterial existence.

A theory of value based upon the process by which value appears through the social validation of abstract labour negates the novelty of immaterial labour. It suggests instead that labour has always been in some way immaterial. This is especially so when we consider labour in the form in which it comes to the fore in capitalist production. This is as abstract labour, socially validated as value-producing in exchange. This hinges upon acceptance of the view that abstract labour has no concrete existence. Abstract labour does not 'happen', it is not 'performed', it is not observable. It exists only in process, in its becoming, and manifests only in exchange.

Thus, immaterial labour is nothing new, when thought of as a kind of labour with no material existence rather than a set of working practices incorporating emotion, cognition and affect instead of handiwork and physicality. On the understanding advanced here, value is incredulous to the specific activities of commodity creation. What is significant is the way in which these labours result in value. And the way in which these labours result in value is through their abstraction and validation as part of total social labour. This totality is ultimately immaterial, expressed in commodities and the proportions in which they exchange with one another. It is brought into existence only by means of the successful sale of a given product.

Contrary to the post-operaists, immaterial labour is not novel. In fact, immaterial labour is and always has been the *only* capitalist labour. We can put it as follows: capitalist labour is *productive* labour, abstract social labour is that which is value-producing and abstract social labour is *immaterial*. Concrete labour, individually and heterogeneously performed, produces no value in and of itself. It must first have its distinct manifestations brought into a relation of abstract equivalence with one another through exchange. Thus, concrete, individual labour is unproductive in and of itself. This judgement applies to *all* concrete labour – material and 'immaterial'. By extension, all labour, as we are able to see it in our daily life – in its active doing – is unproductive or, to use a better phrase, non-productive. Labour is *only* productive in its immaterial aspect, as a social average abstracted from expended concrete labours. Labour in its immaterial aspect here refers to something to which no specific job role or working task conforms.

Concrete existence and immediate abstractness

Hardt and Negri suggest that immaterial labour renders all labour immediately abstract. Immateriality and informationality result in the 'real homogenization of laboring processes'. Diverse productive activities once attained parity through capitalist practices of measurement and valuation, with the ultimate arbiter the exchange of distinct commodities for money. But today, according to Hardt and Negri, concrete heterogeneity is abstracted from immediately, different labours commensurated in their very doing. Hardt and Negri posit that tools have 'always abstracted labour power'. The computer, as the 'universal tool', creates the possibility of this immediate abstraction (Hardt & Negri 2001: 292). Hardt and Negri are correct to say that 'abstraction is essential to both the functioning of capital and the critique of it' and to recognise the centrality of abstract labour in Marx's explanation of how value operates (Hardt & Negri 2009: 159). But they situate the abstract sociality of labour as consisting in the realm of production (or even prior to it), whereas it is really constituted in exchange. The historical emphasis upon the

value-creating capacities of concrete labour expresses a political belief in the power of the working class. Hardt and Negri's insistence upon the antecedent nature of both abstraction and sociality vis-à-vis exchange is no different. It expresses a belief in the power of their own revolutionary subject: the multitude, the collective force of immanently cooperative immaterial labourers.

For Hardt and Negri, things *begin* from social labour (Hardt & Negri 2004: 144). They note that social labour is an abstraction. But they posit it in two problematic ways. It is first an abstraction forged *before* production in the cooperation immanent to immaterial labour. Second, it is an abstraction forged *within* production as the result of this labouring in common. Yet, what I suggest here is that labour becomes social only when its various individual, private manifestations enter into abstract relation. This takes place by means of the exchange of commodities in the marketplace. This is where the sociality of labour is attained.

Labour may be *ideally* social before this. Capitalist production processes begin with money. And money grants an early, anticipatory universality to the labour power it acquires (Bellofiore 2009). But things cannot *begin* with social labour in anything other than this ideal sense. Practices of measurement, quantification and classification are set in place within production to help this cohere. But, ultimately, social labour arises through a process of gradual becoming. It cannot be realised until after exchange has taken place. Later, I will show that this undermines the political implications Hardt and Negri draw from the concept of social labour.

Hardt and Negri's conceptualisation of social labour builds upon the claim of novelty. They ascribe to present-day capitalism completely new characteristics that render obsolete the terms of its previous functioning. But these changes simply better exemplify that which was always true. There *are* existing assumptions to be invalidated. But it is not the perceived newness of contemporary capitalism that makes this invalidation necessary. Rather, capitalism past and present demands a more profound rethinking than that attempted by Hardt and Negri. To some, they travel too far in their immaterialising portrayal of present-day conditions of labour and valorisation. But, perhaps, this portrayal is nowhere near immaterial enough.

According to Hardt and Negri, the law of value Marx describes is irrelevant. An 'important difference between Marx's time and ours' is the changed relationship between labour and value. A certain quantity of time no longer translates into a corresponding quantity of value. The measurability this assumes is no longer attainable in immaterial production. This is because the latter transcends all temporal boundaries (Hardt & Negri 2004: 145). But I would argue that abstract labour-time has no necessary relation to expended concrete labour. It does not matter where or for how long labour takes place. This accepts the difficulty of translating labour-time accurately into an abstract quantitative measure. But I depart from the novelty and crisis Hardt and Negri ascribe to this. The process actually *works*, despite the seeming impossibility and immeasurability that confront it. Hardt and Negri have no theoretical resources to ask how.

Hardt and Negri associate abstract labour with an amount of expended labour-time. But abstract labour does not take place. It has no concrete existence from which to establish a measure of its temporal duration. Abstract labour is a conceptual residue of the act of exchanging two distinct commodities. Owing to this act, the labours that contributed

to the production of these commodities enter a social relationship with each other, via an abstraction that irons out their specificities. The way Hardt and Negri phrase matters leads us to believe instead that, somehow, abstract labour is actually *performed*. Take the purported evolution of a body of workers for whom all work is a possibility and for whom work can take place anywhere and everywhere in the entire fabric of life. This may be in advance in the abstraction of labour. It offers new potential for the commensuration of heterogeneous concrete labours in *exchange*. But Hardt and Negri seem to suggest that the abstraction is complete in the very *doing* of that labour. Hardt and Negri give a reductive reading of the abstraction central to Marx's analysis of the relationship between labour and value. Because of this, they are able to claim to have done away with that analysis. Immaterial labour is taken to be a new fact that defies the underlying laws of capitalist society. But Hardt and Negri do not go far enough in the immateriality they ascribe. This failure blinds them to the continuing relevancy of what they contend is obsolete.

The underlying laws of capitalist society have been enduringly more immaterial than Hardt and Negri acknowledge. Negri (2008) may indeed be right in saying 'immaterial labour is abstract labour in its higher expression' (p. 75), but only insofar as abstract labour has *always been* immaterial. Abstract labour has no material, concrete form, only an immaterial, conceptual quality. It posits expended labour as somehow similar and commensurable, when in fact it is anything but. The changes in production Hardt and Negri describe may make this conceptual abstraction easier, establishing an informational infrastructure upon which all labours rely and through which they may be more easily compared. But this does nothing to contest the abstract functioning of capitalism Marx describes. Rather, it exemplifies its most developed manifestation.

In summary, Hardt and Negri go too far and not far enough. The main constraint is their conceptualisation of the compromised relationship between labour and value. They argue that in Marx's time, heterogeneous labour required equalisation in order for exchange to take place, but today diverse labours do not need homogenisation through the exchange abstraction. They become homogeneous by the computerisation of production. By investing all labour with an informational aspect, this reduces labouring activity to abstract labour in its performance. There is thus no need for the process Marx describes.

But immaterial labour is not abstract labour in its performance. This is because abstract labour, as noted above, has no concrete existence in which it can be performed, observed or measured. Hardt and Negri get close to this with their claim of immeasurability, but with a misplaced focus. Rather than something that can occur in the guise of immaterial labour, abstract labour is a category of social mediation (Heinrich 2005). Concrete labour-time is abstracted from and validated through the process of exchange. What is described as 'immaterial labour' is not abstract labour because abstract labour has no concrete existence. But abstract labour is immaterial. Turning things somewhat on their head, I would suggest that, yes, abstract labour is immaterial today. But, crucially, I also claim that it has always been so. It is this 'immaterial labour' which is the labour that produces value. But the immaterial labour that produces value does not take place. It has no concrete existence. Labour does not become abstract in its doing. It becomes so after the fact, in the exchange relation.

Immeasurable productiveness

What post-operaists such as Hardt and Negri describe as ‘immaterial labour’ is not immediately abstract in its concrete performance. Concrete labour is productive of value only by means of its abstraction. This is a process of becoming which culminates away from the workplace in the sphere of exchange. This account disputes the association of immaterial labour with the production of immeasurable value. It thereby also negates the threat immaterial labour poses to the basis of capitalist valorisation.

Ironically, the ascription of powers of value production to immaterial labour coincides with past physicalist readings of Marx’s theory of value. Both imagine value to be created with every hour that the worker spends expending energy. In the new version, immeasurable value is sent spiralling into the ether for capital to attempt to capture. There are further similarities. For Hardt and Negri, the cooperative self-valorisation of immaterial labour is part of the revolutionary promise of a new class subject. This is akin to how physicalist accounts endowed workers with immense power by means of a supposedly scientific ‘labour theory of value’. The ascription of value production to one class was politically advantageous. Hardt and Negri and their theoretical companions are as productivist as the vulgar Marxism they wish to escape. Doogan (2009: 7–8) notes the prolific use of manufacturing as an example in accounts of postindustrial society. Points are extracted from this sector and extrapolated to the labour market as a whole. Similarly, *Empire* drips with fascination over the ins and outs of restructuring, downsizing and outsourcing. It expresses a materialist flipside of the unabashed productivist belief in the cooperative creativity of human activity, despite post-operaismo’s anti-work ethos.

Vercellone (2010: 105) contends that ‘the source of the “wealth of nations” rests on [...] productive cooperation’ or ‘living labour’. I deny this value-productivity not only to immaterial labour but to all labour in and of itself. I would suggest instead that the types of cooperative sociality heralded by the multitude blossom only in the market, in exchange. Up to the point at which it is validated as such by successful exchange of the good or service it renders, labour is not social, cooperative or productive. To repeat, labour produces value only in its appearance as abstract labour, and this is a factor of exchange rather than of production. Abstract labour may assume an early, anticipatory existence during the time in which work takes place (Harvie 2005). But the point remains the same: productiveness is a feature of exchange rather than of production.

The post-operaists place great importance upon a productivist belief in human labour as the source and substance of all value. But like any series of concrete actions, expended immaterial labour does not produce value in and of itself. This has significant implications for other aspects of the post-operaist treatment of immaterial labour. Not least among these is the claim that contemporary capitalism finds itself faced with a crisis of measurability. Hardt and Negri’s eulogising of immaterial labour rests on the assumption that immaterial labour is productive of value. But it is productive on an unquantifiable and unrepresentable scale, resulting in a ‘crisis of measurability’.

There is an air of celebration in the post-operaist treatment of the immeasurable self-valorisation of immaterial labourers. The outcome is that they champion value as a positive category rather than a relation to be negated and destroyed. This is serviced by the situating of immaterial production within the realm of concrete labour. However, as we

have seen, a theory of value emphasising the social validation of abstract labour tells a different story. It holds that it is abstract labour that determines value, rather than concrete. I conceive abstract labour to be something fully established only by the exchange relation. It comes about as heterogeneous individual labours enter into abstract equivalence with one another. In this movement, they become properly 'social'. Abstract labour both produces value and is produced by it. It acquires existence as value in the successful sale or exchange which ascribes value or worth to something. That something then becomes a commodity, where once it was only a mere product of labour.

Immaterial labour is not immeasurable because value relates to labour's abstract residue in exchange and not its concrete practice. In this sense, it has always been impossible to effectively measure value in relation to concrete labour, only mere guesswork and estimation pending exchange. Value's measure occurs in the same act of exchange which brings it into existence, by means of the social validation of labour as productive of value via the exchange of products of labour as commodities in the marketplace. Yet, this measure is always struggled for. The capitalist need for commensuration always faces the qualitative complexity of reality. But this is an everyday crisis so permanent so as not to be one at all.

Implications for the basic income

The post-operaist refutation of the relevance of the law of value provides the theoretical foundation for the suggestion of a practical policy measure: the UBI. The appeal to this reform is underpinned by the claims critiqued above, reflected in three conceptualisations of reward, recompense and redistribution adequate to contemporary labour and value. The call for a UBI is the most recurring political expression of post-operaist theoretical perspectives. Critiquing these proposals and their justifications represents an opportunity to explore some of the practical and strategic ramifications of the post-operaist approach to value and labour.

Reward for activity within the sphere of production

The first post-operaist conceptualisation of how, why and for what the UBI may be justified links to a notion of reward. This suggests that the UBI rewards that which is not presently rewarded within the realm of production. This argument takes two forms. First, it conceives UBI as a compensation for the unpaid labour upon which the production of capitalist value depends. Vercellone, for instances, uses a traditionalist interpretation of productive labour as 'labor that generates profit and/or participates in the creation of value' to advance an argument for the UBI. Profit accrues via the capitalist paying the productive worker less than the full 'worth' of his or her labour, extracting an amount of labour-time from them that remains effectively 'unpaid'. The UBI helps reward this unpaid effort by means other than the capitalist wage relation. 'Productive' activity has been dispersed outside the workplace into society at large, via mobile information and communications technologies (ICT) and online social networks. This has increased the expanse of unpaid labour, Vercellone contends, and makes even more necessary compensation by a source external to the formal structure of capitalist production (Vercellone 2010: 117–118).

Second, UBI is presented as reward for the novel collective nature of contemporary labour. This sits alongside the individualised instrument of the wage. The latter obscures the collective status of contemporary work. It casts an illusion of individuality. But the UBI would directly compensate the collective bonds that sustain value production today. Hardt and Negri posit that labour has attained a collectiveness that renders impossible attempts to treat it on an individual basis. Individuality, one might infer, characterised to a greater degree earlier forms of work organisation. Today, it is impossible to *measure* labour in such a way that maintains the artifice of individual reward. Thus, calls for an equal income *within* the traditional wage relationship do not take account of this present-day reality. Hence, only a newly social form of recompense can realise such an equalising project (Hardt & Negri 2001: 403).

This conception of UBI as reward is predicated on the idea that labour is immediately cooperative and abstract due to the novel immaterial quality production assumes in contemporary capitalism. I have dismissed key pillars of this argument. The abstraction that validates labour as productive and cooperative comes *after* the process of production, in exchange. I have also critiqued the belief in the recent vintage of this abstract, immaterial rendering of immeasurable value. I have disputed the contention that it that can be neither captured nor recompensed using traditional forms. This difficulty has always been present. The boundary between paid and unpaid work has always bordered on the non-existent, at least within production. I locate the ultimate arbitration of value in the exchange abstraction rather than production. Thus, the idea that labour is unpaid in anything other than an imaginary and principally retrospective sense is untenable. As Arthur tells us, Marx himself warned ‘that the expression “unpaid labour” is scientifically worthless. This is despite its attractiveness as a “popular expression”’. It is a ‘fraudulent notion’ because labour in and of itself has no value without social validation. Thus, the ‘question of its being “paid” or “unpaid” cannot plausibly be asked’ (Arthur 2001: 37, n. 13).

Recompense for activity outside the sphere of production

The second form of the argument that UBI compensates productive activity turns itself outside the workplace into the social realm. It suggests that the unpaid labour that capitalists turn to profit seeps into the non-working life of those participating. The UBI is thus seen in a similar way as in the previous argument, as remuneration for unpaid labour-time. The difference is that this unpaid labour-time is more explicitly seen not as the unpaid labour-time that, say, Marx would have recognised, extracted by cutting away at breaks and mealtimes and extending the length of the working day. Rather, it is that performed away from the watchful eye of the capitalist, in the home and elsewhere. As I will explain later, this is distinct from a third form of argument that privileges the collective and *social* wealth generated from productive activity. This third conception covers that which is not necessarily subject to the private dominion of capitalists and businesses.

Vercellone gives an argument for the UBI as recompense for unpaid non-work activity. He combines this with the previous justification for UBI as a reward for unpaid in-work activity. He differentiates the two. Unpaid in-work activity is productive of capital *and* wealth. But unpaid non-work labour may be unproductive of the former whilst still generating wealth for capitalists (Vercellone 2010: 117–118). In response to the latter situation,

Vercellone advocates a UBI ‘independent[] of employment and conceived as a remuneration for the totality of social times that contribute to the creation of wealth and value’.

Conceived as remuneration for something which is already productive of value, a problem arises. In this account, the UBI secures the payment of labour which was formerly unremunerated. All the UBI would achieve in this way is to compensate productive activity the wage does not. This simply saves capitalists the bother of having to do so themselves. The value relation that renders time spent in productive activity outside work part of the valorisation process of capital as a whole would remain intact. Indeed, it may grow stronger for the provision of a presumably state-funded social support. The latter would undergird the formally off-balance-sheet efforts of the social world outside the formal workplace.

Furthermore, the implication here is that this labour is unremunerated because it is unrecognised. It does not take place under the sign of formal, workplace-situated productive activity. But the expressions of value in capitalist society refer not to concrete expenditures of labour, whether inside or outside the workplace. They refer instead to something more diffuse, an abstract residue. The determination of value is subservient to numbers and to averages constituting imaginary plateaus of commensuration. The particularity of what went into a given commodity’s production disappears. Value is incredulous to concrete labour itself and does not need to take account of where it takes place. The productivity of labour is verified in the moment of exchange despite how or where it happened. Thus, this process of abstraction does not ignore the labour that takes place in the home, unpaid and outside the formal realm of work. The abstraction that is value takes all social activity as its basis and pays out what is appropriate for its continuation.

This justification ultimately bases itself on the purported termination of the law of value in the crisis of measurability. This crisis results from a novel state of affairs whereby labour is so productive of value that traditional means of capture cease to function. Labour produces, inside and outside the workplace, at all times of the day and in all locations and aspects of life, an immeasurable plenitude of value and wealth. Thus, this off-balance-sheet collective contribution must be recompensed. But this justification derives from an understanding of value that falls when subjected to scrutiny.

Redistribution for individual contribution to collective wealth

The third justification is similar to the first two, but sees UBI as a redistribution of collectively, communicatively produced wealth issuing from the immediately abstract cooperativeness of contemporary work and non-work. But I contend that this abstractness and sociality issue from the social validation of labour in exchange. The collaborative value creation of immaterial labour appears in commodity exchange, through no action of individual and collective workers. Rather, this occurs through the circuit of capital as a whole. The functionaries and institutions who oversee the circuit and adopt its standpoint help cohere this: financiers, regulators and advertising professionals. But there are no real shared outcomes for a UBI to redistribute here.

Hardt and Negri see cooperation as ‘completely immanent’ to the nature of contemporary labour. This ‘cooperative interactivity’ does not arise through the coordination of the capitalist. It arises autonomously, through ‘linguistic, communicational and affective

networks' (Hardt & Negri 2001: 294). These networks are situated not in the workplace but in society at large. Vercellone (2010: 105) also sees value arising external to the 'company grounds', outside the capitalist's jurisdiction. He suggests that the 'creativity and knowledge' upon which present-day value depends are mobilised not by owners or overseers but spontaneously by workers themselves.

The limits of these productive networks are unclear. The nature of the network is such that it extends into every sphere of life, engendering limitless cooperation. For post-operaists, the roots of contemporary value lie in knowledge and creativity. Both are dependent on communication for their verification and inspiration. This intense social and communicative context entails that *everyone* has a part in this production. As Hardt and Negri (2001) write, 'the entire multitude produces' (p. 403). This is the basis upon which they make the argument that a 'social wage' is due to all who produce – that is, everyone. This social wage is the UBI. It appears in the context of this argument as something different to a *wage*. It bears little trace of its traditional form as a direct payment for a specific labouring activity. It instead carries the connotation of a redistribution of wealth to which we all, everywhere and at all times, contribute.

I have already dealt with the argument that some component of social production is not factored into the appearances of value and the money nexus. It is of course factored into both. The 'unrewarded' social production that makes possible the creation of commodities falls within the value relation. Its retrospective framework of abstraction is incredulous to the specific performance of labour. It rather expresses in the form of value an ideal amount of labour for the purposes of commensuration. There is nothing to say that social production is not already remunerated in the redistributive way suggested by Hardt and Negri, by means of the value relation.

There is no immeasurable contribution of value that has fallen off the balance sheet and needs to be restored to its rightful place. The work of life is a contribution already taken into account, however imperfectly, by the abstractive frameworks at capital's disposal. Finance is perhaps the exemplary modern attempt at the commensuration of life's complexity. Through such forms of valuation, the allegedly 'immeasurable' productivity of networks is *already priced in*. This is because that which has resulted in value is certified as having done so *in the moment of value's determination*, in exchange. No value is produced anywhere until value arrives and says it has been. Thus, as discussed, there is no way to say that what is paid through the redistribution of the 'wealth of networks' is not already paid within the circuit of capital. On this line of reasoning, any claim to a UBI should distance itself entirely from notions of value or its production. Other conceptualisations of UBI must be developed that achieve this distance.

Conclusion

Earlier, I identified in Hardt and Negri and their intellectual milieu an attachment to an orthodox labour theory of value that they simultaneously set out to refute. The ease with which they go about the latter, of course, depends upon the former. This refutation relies upon certain conservative and traditionalist notions of what value is and from where it issues. Post-operaist rhetoric on the UBI expresses this theoretical orthodoxy. The most vulgar 20th-century interpretations of Marx took from his oeuvre a Lockean lesson. This is that one

should be rewarded for the value one 'creates' and that one should be rewarded only in so far as one creates value. This often carried over from revolutionary demand to state policy, with unfortunate implications. Post-operaist arguments for a UBI draw upon their own implicit theoretical orthodoxy to communicate a similar sentiment. The difference is that it is now updated for the new class subjectivities and political struggles of the 20th century. Like earlier notions of reward, post-operaist justifications of a UBI express in distorted form the logic that capital already follows. This is of the surface illusion of a day's work for a day's pay, of exchange, equality and equilibrium between what is given and what is received. Needless to say, this standpoint also reinforces the compulsion to work in order to live. It is around this that the social relations that ensure the continued survival of capitalism are structured.

The aspiration of a UBI is complicated by its predication on a capitalist money form that implies the relations of abstraction and domination the measure seeks to escape. The arguments of Hardt and Negri, Vercellone et al. serve a politically expedient support to this aim, just as the simplified orthodox interpretation of Marx's value theory was itself a matter of political expedience, availing the working classes of the time with a role in valorisation far beyond that which was or is the case. Hardt and Negri grant precarious workers a capacity for immeasurable value creation. As with past applications of value theory to serve a similar end, it serves to strengthen their collective hand. It also helps bring into existence and give shape to an otherwise ideal social actor, the 'multitude'.

But the theoretical support the post-operaist theory of value offers to the campaign for a basic income is flawed. It misrecognises aspects of valorisation vital to capitalist power and subordination. Resistance depends on the understanding of the value relation. To match political ambition with theoretical rigour, approaches other than that of the post-operaists must develop. I have attempted to lay out a possible direction within the framework of the critique of capitalist social relations deriving from Marx. It is necessary that any such approach treads carefully upon the unsteady conceptual ground on which post-operaists stake their claims.

The conceptualisation I have presented escapes the threat posed to orthodox versions of Marx's value theory by the thesis of immaterial labour. Against post-operaist perspectives, this recalibrated theory of value reinstates the ability to speak of measure. One can do so regardless of any mooted 'crisis' afflicting its application. Indeed, I have identified this crisis as a largely constant factor against which capital must struggle. Value itself comes into being at one and the same time as its measure. What 'crisis' there is in this process of becoming is that crisis faced by the circuit of capital when bringing this measure into existence.

In this article, I have extended an understanding of the immateriality of production to the nature of capitalist valorisation in its pure form through time. This surpasses the thesis of immaterial labour. It reveals the crisis of measurability to be conditional on a certain understanding of how labour and value interrelate. Immaterial labour's purported challenge to the theory of value feeds upon a traditionalist interpretation of what the law of value is and can be. Any orthodox representation of the possibilities of Marxian value theory stands wide open to the challenge mounted by immaterial labour. An interpretation informed by the NRM is better equipped to deal with it.

From an analysis of the value abstraction, one can craft a theorisation of value that accommodates and extends the conceptualisation of immaterial labour. By means of

this extension, we *exceed* existing conceptualisations of immaterial production as concrete practice. It is instead possible to situate immateriality in the capitalist process of valorisation as a whole. The redundancy of the theory of value is conceded on this terrain only when taken to refer to the attempted quantitative measurement of inputs and outputs. But this belongs in old-fashioned factory production. When it becomes a question of what Heinrich (2005) calls a ‘category of social mediation’, things take a different complexion. What matters is that concrete labour is abstracted from and validated through the process of exchange which confirms a good or service as a saleable commodity. This could be the provision of a car, a viral ad or a brand strategy. It is recognition of this that I state the continuing relevancy of value theory and resist any claim of redundancy founded upon a crisis of measurability.

It is important to note that Lazzarato, Negri and others have played a significant part in highlighting profound changes in the sphere of production in capitalist societies. But they have made the error of extrapolating from these changes the notion of a crisis of measurability. They confuse the changes that *have* taken place in production with a crisis of measurability that has not. This is because they misunderstand the nature of labour, of value and of measure. Measure lies elsewhere than in production. It arises in and through social validation. Therefore, the changes in concrete labour matter little to the form that measure takes or the degree of its possibility or impossibility. What counts and is counted is abstract labour, regardless of evolutions in the world of work.

Advancing this analysis, the critical position taken here, informed by value-form theory, exposes flaws in post-operaist arguments for a UBI. In the first part of the article, I critiqued the underlying intellectual basis for these arguments. In the second part, I critiqued the conceptualisations of reward, recompense and redistribution derived from these foundations. Assumptions about value, wealth and labour play a principal role in the explanatory framework used to justify the case for a UBI. But their productivist orthodoxy limits the challenge posed to the rule of value. Any approach consistent with the understanding of capitalism presented here would project a possible way out of capitalist social relations, rather than a recipe for remaining bound within them. This way out is against the value-form, rather than through it.

As Toscano (2014) notes, the UBI ‘is in no way a straightforwardly revolutionary or even transparently anti-capitalist demand’ (pp. 1031–1032). The UBI is a realisable goal only because it may be necessary to implement such a scheme to save capitalism for those who stand to profit most from its survival. This says a lot. I have shown how the UBI, on the faulty theoretical basis of post-operaist proponents, remains completely immanent to the system as it stands. This is why the *Financial Times* (Wolf 2014) can see it as a stabilising force, rather than as a threat. Aside from the anti-productivist possibilities suggested in Weeks’ conception of UBI as a right, there is little to present such a threat. The UBI fully retains the individual income. This individualised relationship to monetary means is a vital part of the capitalist wage system. It serves to mask social exploitation in just as fetishistic a way as the wage does at present. That is, as the provision of a ‘fair share’. This idea of the ‘fair share’, as we have seen, is inherent in the notions of reward, recompense and redistribution upon which post-operaist appeals to the UBI draw. But it is precisely the same logic as that to which we are currently subject: *plus ça change!*

Moreover, in my analysis, the UBI maintains the rule of abstract labour. My account of value tends to stress exchange as the key moment in an abstract unfolding of value. But I follow Harvie (2005) in suggesting that this abstraction develops initially within production itself. It determines the doing and experience of work and life. Value-form theory often elides concrete labour completely. It sometimes overlooks exploitation and antagonism in favour of charting a purely abstract procession of forms (Bonefeld 2014: Chapter 4; Pitts 2015b). Abstract labour as a social rule may not have a concrete existence, but it does have a concrete impact that is concretely experienced by those involved. It structures work, life and social relations in capitalist society. It standardises, rationalises and homogenises. It suppresses spontaneity, crushes desire and denies human dignity (Holloway 2002). As such, anything that retains the rule of abstract labour retains that which renders life under capitalism so alienating, inhumane and boring.

For Christian Lotz (2014), it is money that 'frames' reality in such a way as to make this social abstraction possible. Only through money is social existence possible or knowable under capitalism. Sociality owes itself to the abstract monetary relation by which everything is exchangeable with everything else. As a monetary measure, the UBI stands no threat to the monetary order through which the rule of abstract labour structures existence. The radical efficacy of a UBI is neutered by its grounding in the same nexus of money and abstract labour to which we are already subject. Non-monetary solutions to the impasse must be sought (Nelson & Timmerman 2011).

The basic income is already a real prospect (Dinerstein et al. 2016). We need not wait to think beyond it. Questions unanswered by a UBI can already be asked. Such questions concern less the source or amount of the money in our pocket, as why it is there at all. What do we need it for? Why are those things not available otherwise? How do we get it? Why do we have to do what we have to do to get it? And why do we have it and need it in the first place? These critical, future-facing questions may help 'frame' basic income in ways that pose it against and beyond the present state of things.

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